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-Jonestown-

Charles B. Seib

What the Media Did

The spinoffs have begun. Even before the headlines fade from memory, the horror of Jonestown has become a marketable commodity.

Late last week, a team of Washington Post staffers holed up in the Madison Hotel to grind out an instant book to be called "Guyana Massacre: The Eyewitness Account." Thanks to the miracles of technology, you may be able to buy it today.

Across the country, a San Francisco Chronicle team has produced "Suicide Cult: The Inside Story of the Peoples Temple Sect and the Massacre in Guyana." That, too, should be for sale today.

So in the book department, at least, Jonestown has been reduced to a contest between two fast-moving publishers —Berkley, which put out The Post's book, and Bantam, which handled the Chronicle's—to see who could tap the morbidity market first.

There may be other book projects in the works. And I suppose that in the show-biz warrens of New York and Los Angeles the possibilities of film or television docu-dramas on Mad Jim Jones and his cult are being run up the flagpoles.

That's the way it is these days, and there is no point in decrying it. But before the entrepreneurs take over, there are a few things that should be said about the coverage of Jonestown by the print and broadcast news media.

It was what we call in this business a hell of a story. And that is the way we covered it. Acres of newsprint, hours of air time were devoted to it. All the shocking developments—the airport murders, the nightmare of mass suicide at the Jonestown pavilion, the escalating body counts, the sickening task of removing the dead—were reported at length.

Never was the ability of television to destroy the insulation of distance more dramatically demonstrated. Because of

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the remarkable performance of NBC's Robert Brown, who kept his camera operating until he was gunned down, we saw the airport massacre a matter of hours after it happened—and in full color. And soon thereafter we were taken—and retaken, again and again—to the body-heaped pavilion.

Barely had the television and newspaper assaults on our senses abated when Time and Newsweek hit us with their dreadful color pictures, more horrible in a way than the television pictures because they wouldn't go away. Both news magazines displayed bodies on their covers and proudly promoted what was inside under identical titles: "The Cult of Death." Newsweek topped Time, incidentally, with 26 pages on the story to Time's 9.

Getting back to the daily coverage, the hype level was mercifully low. That favorite and, in this case, totally inadequate word "bizarre" was overworked, of course. And there were a few attempts at sensationalizing a story that was sensational enough. For example, a Chicago Tribune banner headline: "Reporters Visit 'City of the Dead.'"

As the week wore on there were the inevitable what-does-it-all-mean articles, discoursing learnedly on cults and previous mass suicides and mixing reassurances (it has happened before) with foreboding (today's society encourages this sort of thing).

One eminent purveyor of the big picture managed to relate Jonestown, the Middle East negotiations and the SALT talks, the common denominator being a decline of manners and a confusion of responsibility and authority.

In assessing the coverage, a nagging question surfaces: Would it have turned out differently if reporters and cameramen had not accompanied Rep. Leo Ryan on his mission? Was it the presence of the press that drove the paranoiac Jim Jones to his final madness?

It is a legitimate question but an unanswerable one.

Often the presence of reporters and cameras can be a deterrent to violent or irrational acts. But in this instance, there was a fatal, unknown ingredient. Jones was mad.

It could be—we'll never know—that, when he became aware that the reporters were finding members of his community who wanted out, he realized his world was crumbling and decreed its destruction.

The media have told us what happened at Jonestown. But the larger question remains: What enabled a suicidal madman to take 900 people with him? The psychiatrists, the behaviorists, the religionists and even the philosophers will be chewing on that one for a long, long time.

I hope they also give some thought to what Jonestown and its vivid media coverage did to the rest of us. Can a society take bloated bodies and trailerloads of shiny corpse containers with its evening meals and be unchanged? How much can one read and hear about the stench of death and grisly mortuary logistics and come out unscathed?

Are we emerging from the shared experience of Jonestown more caring and more aware of our common humanity? Or have we, in self-defense, become harder and more isolated?

The answers to those questions are important to the public and the media. But they must come later. For now we can say that the media did what they were supposed to do. As society's messengers, their job was to deliver a terrible and frightening message. And they did it well.

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—Jonestown—

William Raspberry

. . . And What Government Can't Do

One of the persistent threads running through conversations about the mind-numbing tragedy at Jonestown, Guyana, is that the U.S. government was somehow at fault.

The FBI, the CIA, the State Department—*somebody*—should have done something to stop Jim Jones and his followers before they went off the deep end.

Perhaps the clearest statement of the theme came in a recent column by Carl T. Rowan:

"The gruesome tragedy in Guyana is an appalling example of governmental failure to act," he wrote, "primarily because government officials are timid about breaching sanctuaries of 'religion'....

"It is easy enough for the State Department, the FBI, the army and a host of other agencies to spring to action *after* a congressman and a news team are murdered and more than 700 [now at least 912] members of the Peoples Temple are found dead."

No less than Rowan and others who are faulting the timidity of the government, I wish the stupefying tragedy in Guyana could have been averted. Perhaps it could have been, if there had been some solid evidence that Jones had threatened beforehand to do in 900—or nine or even one—of his followers.

We did know some things that were deeply disturbing to a lot of us. We knew that Jones's followers seemed to have an unhealthy commitment to him, that thousands and thousands of dollars in Social Security and welfare checks were being endorsed over to the Peoples Temple, that hundreds of his members were signing their property to the organization and that there existed the opportunity for someone to become awfully rich as a result.

But what action would we have wanted the government to take?

Before answering that question with regard to Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple, ask yourself what government action you would recommend in the following situation:

You learn that a group of women, all of them single, many of them smilingly naive and some of them, quite frankly, "different," has been taken to some remote place and hidden away from the public view.

You learn that they have been talked into giving up their personal property for the good of the organization and that they now live in unbelievably modest circumstances, working long, arduous hours for little or no pay. Even on those rare occasions when they are permitted to leave the compound, they must be accompanied by at least one other member.

For all you know, many of them may wish to escape, but perhaps they fear for their lives if they try to get away. Maybe someone has convinced them that some unspeakable thing worse than physical death will be their lot if they turn on their overseers. You simply don't know.

Question: Would you urge a government investigation of the organization, to see what was going on? Or would you scream bloody anti-Catholic murder if the FBI raided the convent?

The point is, some things that look terrible when they are done by members of "cults" seem perfectly all right when they are done by members of established religions.

At what point does it become the government's role to decide which religious group is legitimate and which is only a "cult"?

Should Abraham have been convicted of attempted murder when he tricked his son Isaac up the mountain to do him in?

Should Moses have been brought up on charges for taking the children of Israel off into the wilderness, away from the fleshpots of Egypt, risking mass starvation in the process?

Should Jesus of Nazareth have been treated as a public threat (He *was* so treated) for talking ordinary hardworking citizens into quitting their jobs and abandoning their families in pursuit of His farfetched promises?

The point is not that Jim Jones (or Elijah Muhammed or Brother Gene Ewing or Rev. Ike) can be compared with Abraham, Moses or Jesus. The point is that all of these leaders were seen by their contemporaries as smooth-talking slicksters, and their followers were seen as naive fools.

But it is not against the law to be either slick or naive. The government must tread with great care in protecting people who do not wish to be protected.

And it must be a thousand times more careful when the impulse is to protect people from what appear to be misguided religious beliefs.

A lot of things went wrong—inside Jim Jones's head, among his followers and in the American society at large—to produce the tragedy at Jonestown.

But I'm not sure it's fair to lay much of the blame at the feet of governmental "timidity."

There are some things the government can't do for us—and shouldn't even try.

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